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A tale of two towns: Learning community initiatives in Bega Valley and Thuringowa

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Current learning community initiatives in Bega Valley and Thuringowa illustrate trends that are likely to become more significant in communities across Australia. In both cases, local government councils have supported the projects with the council library taking a leading entrepreneurial role in the initiative. This role reflects the growing interest of libraries in lifelong learning, and in their role as community learning centres. These initiatives are discussed against the background of wider issues in the development of learning communities in Australia.

Australian experience in building learning communities since 1998 poses the question as to how learning communities may be initiated in a range of contexts and sustained over time.

Whereas early Australian initiatives, such as Victorian Learning Towns and the ANTA National Learning Community Program 2001 received government funding to initiate these projects, progress up to now has been slow when such government funding is not available. Moreover, a number of projects supported by ANTA in 2001 did not continue after the period of start-up funding ceased, so that the question of how to sustain initiatives assumes significance in this context.

I have addressed this question on several occasions, and in the keynote address at the 2002 National Learning Community Conference, I suggested that we stood at the threshold of a new generation of learning community initiatives in which development would be supported by a wider range of key stakeholders apart from Commonwealth and State governments (Kearns 2002). These stakeholders included universities, libraries, councils, industry, community organisations, as well as governments in whole-of-government strategies.

Local government assumes particular significance among these stakeholders because of the need for local frameworks to promote collaboration and partnership among stakeholders, and build social capital. While relatively few councils up to now have been leaders in innovative learning community initiatives, this situation is starting to change, and current initiatives in Bega Valley and Thuringowa may be seen as the forerunners of what is likely to be a significant pattern of local community development. A tale of two towns may become a tale of many towns, cities and villages.

Moreover, both developments are of interest in respect of the key role played by the council library in the initiation and development of the project. There is a significant trend emerging in Australia and overseas for libraries to be seen as community learning centres, so that libraries are well placed to take a leadership role, as has happened in Bega Valley and Thuringowa, in gaining the support

of councils for learning community initiatives, and building the necessary alliances and partnerships to sustain such initiatives.

The Bega Valley and Thuringowa initiatives are discussed below in terms of how these initiatives came about, and the lessons for adult and community education and other sectors of education.

The wider issues

Governments across Australia are examining the question of how to respond to a context of constant and unpredictable change, solve recurring skill shortages, build an innovation economy able to respond to change and seize opportunities, and sustain communities. These issues were examined in my recent report for Adult Learning Australia on future directions for lifelong learning in Australia (Kearns 2005).

Whereas various aspects of responding to this context have been addressed in government policies and strategies, community learning aspects – apart from the formal education sectors – have seldom received the attention they deserve as key contributors to social, cultural, and economic change and innovation. However, the reality is that building an innovation economy and society will require considerable cultural change and learning strategies at all levels to drive this process of cultural change. Local and regional learning community initiatives assume significance in this regard.

The key requirement for local infrastructure to build collaboration, partnerships, and social and human capital was the main conclusion of a review of policies and strategies to build a learning and training culture in five OECD countries that George Papadopoulos and I undertook in 2000 (Kearns & Papadopoulos 2000). This study of policies in Sweden, United States, Germany, UK and the Netherlands concluded that, whereas local infrastructure was significant across these countries in encouraging and supporting local initiatives,

Australia, with its history of state government delivery of services such as schooling and health, was less well placed to build a learning culture through local collaboration and partnership across a range of sectors.

This situation is starting to change with such initiatives as the Victorian Local Learning and Employment Networks, and the emerging interest of a number of councils in learning community initiatives and the general strengthening of social, cultural and economic planning by councils. Moreover, the growing interest of State governments in issues involved in engaging and sustaining communities – reflected, for example, in the recent Queensland/UN Conference on Engaging Communities – has focused attention on issues involved in building social capital in communities as an instrument for engaging and sustaining communities.

The discussion of the Bega Valley and Thuringowa initiatives that follows should be seen in this context as examples of local initiatives responsive to the needs and opportunities confronting twenty first century Australia. The key roles of libraries and councils in both initiatives may be seen as a tale of a sleeping giant awakened with a kiss of life.

The Bega Valley Learning Communities

The Bega Valley Shire is located in the far south-eastern coast of New South Wales, approximately half-way between Sydney and Melbourne. With 6,279 square kilometres, the shire is the largest coastal council in the State. The mix of farming and tourism in the Shire is reflected in a population pattern stretched across six towns and twelve villages in the Shire. Well known tourist destinations, such as Merimbula, Bermagui and Tathra, co-exist with Bega as the service centre of the shire, and with the network of villages (such as Bemboka, Candelo and Cobargo) across the shire. This pattern produces considerable diversity in the shire.

The population at the 2001 Census was 30,524 involving an increase of 1.1% since the 1996 Census. Of this population, 6,956 (22.8%) live in rural areas outside the towns and villages. Whereas the population of all towns grew between the 1996 and 2001 censuses, that of the villages was more mixed with about half declining and the same proportion growing.

The unemployment rate in the shire in 2001 was 9.6% compared with the State average of 7.2%. The average gross income in the shire was \$470 for men and \$330 for women which were 29% and 23% below the NSW average respectively. Average family income was similarly 32% lower than the State average.

While this pattern reflects a common situation in much of rural and coastal Australia, I found in the Bega Valley Learning Communities Seminar held in September 2005 a strong assertion of the significance of lifestyle in the Bega Valley community. In this way, Bega Valley appears to reflect much of the shifts in values and lifestyle found across many areas of Australia.

Origins of the initiative

The Bega Valley Learning Community initiative had its origins in consultations undertaken by the Bega Valley Shire Council in the development of Social and Cultural Plans for the Council. Consideration of the role of education and learning by a broadly representative Education Focus Group led to the conclusion that the possible development of learning communities across the shire should be examined, along with the possible development of an educational roundtable or network. It was decided that these questions should be taken up at a working seminar with broad community representation.

The seminar

The seminar to consider these questions was held on 7 September during Adult Learners' Week. Planning for the seminar was

undertaken jointly by the Manager of the Bega Valley Shire Library Service, Janice Biggin, and the Chair of the Far South Coast Community College (FSCCC), Gordon Beattie, so that the initiative developed around a core library/ACE partnership. Forty seven people participated in the seminar representing a broad cross-section of education, cultural and community organisations in the shire. Senior council staff also participated. Debbie Best, the Lithgow Learning City Coordinator, and myself participated in the seminar to bring some external perspectives.

The seminar showed support for the proposals coming from the Education Focus Group and confirmed these directions for developing the Bega Valley as a network of learning communities. The outcomes of the seminar therefore involved the following developments:

- a **Bega Valley Learning Communities Network** to be established
- a **Learning Communities Network Working Group** to serve as the executive arm of the Network
- **Learning Gateways** to be developed to serve as a framework for collaborative projects including research and on-going dialogue, and for building social capital in the shire.

The starting point for the development of the Learning Councils Network will be the organisations and individuals that participated in the seminar. The Library / Community College partnership will continue to be central to progressing this initiative. The Network Working Group will associate the key stakeholders for collaboration including LandCare, the Bega Education Access Centre, begavalley.com, the Library Services and FSCCC.

Two initial research projects will enable the impetus of the seminar to be maintained. These involve:

- a **University-Community Engaged Research Project** to be funded by Wollongong University and undertaken by a local upper level student from the Bega Education Access Centre, and

- a **Study Visit by the Manager of Library Services to the United States** under a NSW Country Public Libraries Association Colin Mills Scholarship to examine public libraries engaging with their communities in building lifelong learning in a rapidly changing environment.

In addition, Bega Valley will host the 2006 annual conference of the NSW Country Public Libraries Association so that this will provide an opportunity for a wider discussion of the current initiatives in the Bega Valley.

Embedding in the work of the Council

A key aspect of sustaining the learning communities' initiative in the Bega Valley will be to find ways to embed learning strategies in the work of the council. The current development of Social and Cultural Plans by the council provides an opportunity for this to happen. The draft Bega Valley Social Plan is currently on the council website for comment (www.begavalley.nsw.gov.au/community/draft_social_plan/default.htm). The draft Social Plan recommends that the council facilitate lifelong learning in Bega Valley Shire and that the council is developed as a learning organisation. The Social Plan should provide a platform to progress lifelong learning objectives.

Thuringowa Learning Community

Thuringowa City Council is based on an area in northern Queensland that surrounds Townsville. The population in the 2001 Census was 50,946. Continued population growth up to 2024 is forecast, with a projected population of between 98,245 and 100,905 persons by 2024. While Thuringowa, like Bega Valley, has a high proportion of residents born in Australia, it differs in having a relatively young population with a lower proportion of older people, and with a relatively high proportion of Indigenous persons (6.3%). These characteristics go along with a fairly high Year 12 completion rate, and with high average household income.

Origins of the initiative

The origins of this initiative owed much to the interest of the chief executive officer of Thuringowa City Council who became aware of the learning community concept through a visit to the Hume Global Learning Village. The development of Thuringowa as a learning community was noted in the Council's Corporate Plan for 2005–2010 which included the aspiration for an inclusive and strong community which facilitated community learning of all kinds, and the development of a 'Smart City'. This interest provided a platform for the Council library to take a leadership role in the initiative of the project with both Library Managers, Susan Coker and Ron Store, actively involved.

An application was made to the Queensland State Library for a Strategic Development Grant. This grant of \$21,500 provided for the conduct of a learning audit, and for the convening of a Learning Communities and Public Libraries Workshop held on 12–13 October following the completion of the learning audit.

The learning audit

The learning audit was undertaken by Kim Harrington for Harrington Projects, with the report of the audit then considered in the workshop held on 12–13 October. The Learning Community Audit Report highlighted both learning strengths and needs, and proposed fourteen strategies which were grouped under four key learning drivers:

- civic capacity
- education and lifelong learning
- health and well-being
- employment.

These strategies involved a broad approach to the role of learning in a community such as Thuringowa in which the wider benefits of learning, in sectors such as health and well-being, were recognised. The strategies range across broad areas that build social and human

capital, and include objectives directed at both young people and the ageing workforce.

Two priorities were recommended for progressing the proposed strategies. These were to:

- develop a strategic leadership group to link across sectoral and community levels in Thuringowa, and
- develop and support a marketing, communication and coordination strategy for learning.

It was recommended that the second priority be implemented by Council as an important function of service delivery.

The Learning Communities and Public Libraries Workshop

The learning audit report was considered at the workshop held on 12–13 October, together with case studies and presentations on developments across Australia. The workshop was interesting in having both Thuringowa and national perspectives, with the program including presentations on developments in Hume, Portland, Pine Rivers, Caloundra and Caboolture, as well as on Thuringowa development.

There was a strong representation of Thuringowa City Council staff with the chief executive officer of the Council, Lyn Russell, an active participant along with Council senior managers and library staff. The Queensland State Librarian, Lea Giles-Peters, was also a participant so that the strength of the workshop resided in the interaction of Thuringowa, library, learning community, and national perspectives throughout the course of the discussions.

Much of the discussion focused on the next steps to be taken, clarification of roles, how to achieve ownership by the community, and the forming of a broadly-based leadership group. The workshop endorsed the general directions of the learning audit report and agreed on a process for follow up. Key points in the consensus included the following:

- there should be an early report to Council on the proposed follow-up action
- achieving community ownership of the initiative should be a guiding principle
- a broadly representative leadership group should be established with key stakeholders such as business and industry, education institutions, and community organisations represented, as well as the Council and library
- an organic view of the development process was necessary with implementation dynamic and flexible, and proceeding through a number of stages of development – achieving early ‘runs on the board’ was seen as necessary through picking ‘low hanging fruit’
 - while the initial focus will be on Thuringowa, development may be towards broader regional perspectives involving Thuringowa/ Townsville partnership in key areas, and possibly an ultimate North Queensland learning region.

These conclusions supported the strategic priorities of the learning audit report, and provide a mechanism to carry forward the initiative that had much in common with the outcomes of the Bega Valley seminar.

The broader implications for the role of the Queensland State Library in supporting community learning through the role of libraries, and insights for national perspectives on the role of libraries as community learning centres and active partners in learning community initiatives, were also outcomes taken away from the workshop.

General comment

While the Bega Valley and Thuringowa initiatives are at an early stage of development, both initiatives are of interest in terms of roles and processes that drive learning community development in regional areas. These lessons relate, in particular, to ways in which learning

community developments may be initiated, and to the partnership building process. The support of councils in each case is significant, and holds promise of the initiatives being sustained through potential connections with current planning and development.

In the initiation of each project, the role of the library was significant. This reflected the interest of the libraries concerned, in the developing role of the library as a community learning centre. As council libraries, each was well placed to secure the support of senior council officers and councillors for the initiative.

The initiative taken by the libraries in these cases may also be seen as an expression of the civic entrepreneur role which is likely to become more significant in twenty-first century Australian society with the evolving role of civil society (Schauder 2005). These are grounds for taking the view that the conditions of this society will require a redefinition of the roles of government, market and civil society with new forms of partnership increasingly important. Engaging and encouraging local and regional communities will be a critical challenge.

Case studies of social innovation and entrepreneurial initiatives in America and Australia illustrate this emerging trend. In America, a recent book by Heaton, Melville and Walesh (2004) illustrates a range of cases with initiatives by “civic revolutionaries” engaging and mobilising communities. In Australia, a recent collection of case studies and discussion papers from the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA 2005a, b, c) shows a wide range of initiatives taken in harnessing the potential of information technology to extend learning opportunities in communities and build social capital.

The role of technology in furthering learning in communities attracted considerable discussion in both the Bega Valley seminar and the Thuringowa workshop, and it was clear that further guidance and

dialogue in this area is necessary, building on the lessons of projects under the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (including, in particular, the e-learning Creative Community Partnerships projects), and the work of the Australian Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts on technology/ community relationships, building social capital and transforming the non-profit sector, and the overall impact of ICT on civil society. The National Networking Workshop on the e-learning Creative Community Partnerships to be held in Canberra on 24 November should provide useful insights in furthering progress in the critical area of technology – learning – community relationships.

The Bega Valley initiative is of interest in the partnership that developed between the Library and Far South Coast Community College in carrying forward the outcomes of the seminar held on 7 September. There is substantial potential for ACE providers to be active partners, along with libraries, councils, education institutions and community organisations, in the development and sustaining of learning community initiatives. Such active involvement will serve to re-define the role of adult and community education, perhaps along the lines outlined in the Achieving Australia report with the learning broker role increasingly significant.

While there are various similarities between the Bega Valley and Thuringowa initiatives, in such areas as providing for ongoing leadership and network building, there are also differences that point to the range of ways in which a learning community project can be initiated and developed. Whereas the Thuringowa initiative adopted the usual learning audit approach to assessing need and involving the community, the Bega Valley project arose from the development of council Social and Cultural Plans, with a seminar then used to gain community support and devise machinery for partnership and collaboration, and with a research phase to follow these events.

It is likely that the best approach for other communities will depend on local circumstances, so that the existence of options for the development process adds to flexibility in the response to local needs and conditions.

Both the Bega Valley seminar and Thuringowa workshop confirmed my view that the significance of informal learning in many contexts is not well understood in Australian society, and is still commonly confused with formal learning in the education system. For this reason, some councils have been reluctant to undertake learning community initiatives as this is seen as a State government education responsibility.

The question of sustaining these initiatives lies in the future. However, the active support of each council holds promise for embedding the initiatives in the future development of each community. As models of a pattern of community-building that is likely to become increasingly common across Australia, there are grounds for optimism that a tale of two towns may become the tale of many towns and communities.

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About the author

Peter Kearns has had a lifetime of experience working in education and training in a range of contexts, in Australia and overseas, as a teacher, public servant and consultant. He has worked as a consultant since 1990, with a special interest in lifelong learning and in innovative strategies for learning in organisations, institutions and in communities. He is currently a Visiting Research Fellow with Adult Learning Australia.

Peter wrote on these two communities as library-led/council initiatives. He says that libraries are becoming increasingly interested in their role in lifelong learning and learning communities, so he hopes his article may have a general interest for libraries and councils. He presented a workshop in Thuringowa on 12–13 October which reviewed the Thuringowa learning audit, and discussed some general aspects of building learning communities. He also gave the keynote address at the annual conference of the Victorian Council of State School Organisations on 15 October which had the interesting theme, "From schools to vibrant learning communities".

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~~And now it's time to say goodbye – a decade of learning and development in rural and remote health~~

~~Ross Hartley~~

~~Adjunct Associate Professor, School of Health,
University of New England,
Hunter New England Health~~

~~The halcyon days of learning and development in New England Area Health Service ended with the 2005 NSW Health restructure. The previous decade had been one of creativity, innovation, risk-taking and major reform. The new order's focus is workforce capability and learning, touting strategic development rather than learning and development per se. What changes are effected remains to be seen.~~

~~This paper takes a collage approach to the context and issues that drove innovation and reform in learning in the bush. Apart from providing a single repository for these, the attempt is made to reflect on the worth and value of the journey undertaken. Given the major difference in our approach to learning, compared with that from the other (then) seventeen area health services, the question is asked of our efficacy in transforming the learning culture.~~